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DE RUEHTU #0227/01 0341440
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 031440Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9654
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1519

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000227

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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY), NEA/MAG (GERMAINE, LAWRENCE),
NEA/PPD (FERNANDEZ, SMITH, AGNEW), NEA/PI (MULENEX, KIRBY),
NEA/PA, NEA/IPA, I/GNA, DRL, CWG-PD
PARIS FOR ZEYA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2016

TAGS: PREL KDEM KPAO EAID PHUM KMPI TS

SUBJECT: SIGNS OF INCREASED PRESS FREEDOM, BUT TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS ARE SKEPTICAL

REF: A) TUNIS 2450 (2005) B) TUNIS 2395 (2005)

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

1.(C) Summary: Over the past three months, the GOT has taken small, but public steps to improve the situation of the media. The steps include the legislative removal of depot legal (prior review) for Tunisian print media (Ref A), a highly publicized campaign on the part of newly-appointed Minister of Communications Rafaâ Dekhil to reach out to Tunisian journalists, the announcement of the creation of a new Journalists' Union, an increase in funding for opposition papers, and an increase in financial assistance for journalists. These steps were greeted, however, with skepticism on the part of Tunisian journalists who were hesitant to believe that the GOT was really easing restrictions on press freedom in the country. The January 18 GOT seizure of two Tunisian newspapers from the newsstands further convinced an already skeptical media corps that the GOT has no real intention to relinquish its control over the press. Embassy officials have noted what appears to be reduced laudatory coverage of Presidential activities (a subject that has traditionally dominated the front pages) and the apparent testing -- however tentative -- of expanded red lines for reporting that has resulted in increased critical coverage of social and economic issues. Tunisian journalists, however, are quick to assure us that self-censorship on the part of both writers and editors is still pervasive and that the GOT continues to dictate what can and cannot be written in the local press. End Summary.

What Appear to Be Positive Signs

2.(U) In his speech on November 7, 2005, President Ben Ali announced several measures to "promote pluralism in the media." These steps included the creation of a new cultural radio station, an increase in financial assistance available for Tunisian journalists, and an increase in government funding for opposition newspapers. The most significant of these measures, however, was the start of the legislative process to lift prior review (depot legal) for Tunisian print media. (NB: Ben Ali had originally announced the end of depot legal for the print media in May 2005. Depot legal continues to remain in force for books and foreign press). The Tunisian media closely followed the legislative process involved in removing the depot legal requirement from the law, giving front page coverage to the bill's examination in Parliament and its subsequent signing into law by President Ben Ali on January 12, 2006.

¶3. (SBU) The past three months also witnessed several other

developments on the media scene. Rafaa Dekhil, Minister of Communications and Relations with the Chamber of Deputies and the Chamber of Advisors (a ministry that was created in August 2005), engaged in almost weekly meetings with a wide range of Tunisian journalists, newspapers, and media organizations, all advertised as aimed at improving the situation of journalists and the press in Tunisia. On January 4, newspapers reported that the Secretary General of the Tunisian Labor Union (UGTT) had announced the creation of a Journalists' Union in 2006. (NB: Such a union has been in discussion for close to ten years, but had never been formally announced.) The clear message for the public was that the GOT was seriously engaging with the fourth estate to find ways to improve the situation of the press in Tunisia.

4.(C) Since November, Embassy staff also observed reporting in the Tunisian press on previously-taboo subjects. The first private television station in Tunisia, TV Hannibal, crossed redlines in its Ramadan programming, without any apparent repercussions. These redlines included taking cameras into the homes of poor Tunisians to observe how they celebrated Ramadan and airing a miniseries that referred (via subtle innuendo) to previously untouchable topics as the influence of the Trabelsi family (the First Lady's family) and the failure of the GOT to provide assistance to the public during the 2003 floods. TV Hannibal and the Tunisian written press also recently covered previously taboo social issues such as family violence, poor public hospital conditions and unwanted pregnancies. Also, in December and early January, we noted that newspaper coverage of President Ben Ali's daily activities was no longer dominating all of Tunisian media and that his photo was not in its regular place above the fold in every newspaper. Newspapers openly debated the issue of rising olive oil prices and some editorials began to address sensitive issues such as

democracy in the Arab world, the poor state of the Tunisian media and the need for reform in the press. In December, we counted at least three editorials in the mainstream press that directly criticized the current state of the press and civil society in Tunisia, all without repercussions. The December Parliamentary meetings received wide coverage and included the views of the opposition parties, and "Al Mawqif" and "Attariq Attajdid" regularly published newspapers full of pointed criticism of the GOT.

Journalists Skeptical

5.(C) Tunisian journalists, however, remain cynical about these apparent signs of improvement. All of them dismiss the end of depot legal as having little effect on their work, and most argue that Minister Dekhil will never have the influence or power to reverse what is perceived to be President Ben Ali's intention to control the media. Many of our contacts argue that the public is not watching TV Hannibal and that, in any case, due to his relation by marriage to the First Lady, TV Hannibal's owner will never take the lead on challenging the regime. Contacts tend to agree that social issues were being more openly treated but caution that such coverage will cease if it ever touches GOT interest in preserving its image in the eyes of the public. Journalists dismiss those editorials that we found daring, arguing that they were allowed to run in newspapers with poor circulation and that the courage of one or two editors could in no way be viewed as a change in self-censorship. Finally, journalists tell us that the President's photo had been absent from the front page simply because he had few public engagements during the period in question. (Comment: In the past, presidential inactivity has never stopped Tunisian newspapers from daily publication of the President's portrait or other stock presidential photos. End comment.)

6.(C) Journalists have told us that the GOT continues to directly and indirectly control the coverage of domestic events. Examples are abundant. A journalist at the most widely-read Tunisian newspaper, privately owned Arabic language "Ash Shourouq" told the IO that most of his articles on the December Parliamentary meetings were censored. (Note:

"Ash Shourouq" is supposedly read by around 800,000 Tunisians each day. This takes into account the daily circulation of 80,000 and the fact that each paper is believed to be read by 10 people. Given its wide public influence, it is tightly controlled by the GOT despite being privately-owned.) Good contacts at both "Ash Shourouq" and its sister French-language daily "Le Quotidien" reported that recently-published editorials attacking opposition figures were drafted and sent to the newspapers by the GOT. Journalists also recalled that important domestic issues such as the continued activity of the October 18 movement (Ref B) and a recent debate on the use of the hijab by Tunisian women were absent from the Tunisian press. (Comment: The GOT position on the hijab was presented and defended, but the opposing view was not provided. End Comment.)

Worst Fears Confirmed

7.(C) On January 18, the GOT seized all of the copies of two Tunisian newspapers (mainstream weekly "Al Akhbar Al Joumhouriya" and opposition weekly "Al Mawqif") from the newsstands apparently based on their articles on the possible rise in bread prices in the coming months. Rumor has it that the GOT found these articles, which were published close to the anniversary of the 1984 bread riots, to have been too provocative. These seizures have served to transform skepticism on the part of Tunisian journalists to a complete conviction that the GOT will never release its grip on the Tunisian press. Contacts note that seizures send two important messages: the GOT is closely monitoring the press and the GOT is unafraid of publicly demonstrating its tight control of the media. These two messages serve to reinforce other fears (based on existing precedents) that plague Tunisian journalists, such as the possibility of losing their jobs, negative repercussions on family members, and possible imprisonment.

Journalists Unwilling to Mobilize

8.(C) Despite a palpable sense of frustration, Tunisian journalists appear resigned to their fate, at least, as some note, until Ben Ali departs office. During a January gathering of 15 journalists, the newsstand seizures dominated the discussion. When the IO asked what action the Tunisian Journalists Association (AJT) would take in response to the seizures, an AJT board member who was present replied that there would be no reaction. The question was raised whether the journalists could present their concerns to Minister Dekhil, but this idea was quickly dismissed. Journalists simply repeated the same refrain: "This is the situation in which we live. It is never going to change."

Glimmer of Hope Remains

9.(C) In conversations with close to 20 journalists over the past months, only one note of optimism was expressed. Jamel Arfaoui, a journalist at a government-owned newspaper and a member of AJT, informed the IO that, since the WSIS, journalists were beginning to debate among themselves issues that used to be untouchable. Arfaoui felt that fear was dissipating and that, given time, these private debates might become more public.

Comment

10.(C) The GOT's recent engagement on press freedom is likely a result of both USG pressure and a post-WSIS realization on the part of the GOT that they can no longer control every aspect of news coverage of Tunisia. Recent news coverage of previously censored domestic issues such as a sudden spike in consumer olive oil prices and scandalous hospital conditions indicates that the GOT has moved its redlines back to allow Tunisian press coverage of certain social and economic subjects. The remaining (unspoken but widely known) redlines, however, remain and continue to encompass coverage of opposition movements, debate on government policy, and

mention of the First Lady's family. The recent GOT seizures of newspapers in order to limit information on news that the government deems potentially destabilizing and the continuing manipulation of private newspapers to discredit opposition movements are clear signs of the GOT intention to continue to control the media when it comes to politically-sensitive issues.

11.(C) It is unfortunate that most local journalists continue to play their customary role of self-censorship and resignation to a situation which, in their eyes, cannot be changed by anyone but the President. While this reaction, or lack of reaction, on the part of journalists is the natural legacy of over fifteen years of tight and heavy-handed GOT control of the media and civil society, the situation of the press in Tunisia cannot evolve if the journalists themselves are unwilling to acknowledge movement on the part of the GOT, miss small windows of opportunity to push the redlines that exist, and refuse to publicly react to GOT actions such as the seizure of newspapers. The challenge for the USG is to continue to find ways to further engage both the GOT and Tunisian journalists on the need for a free and responsible press.

HUDSON